

ISSN 1343-8980

創価大学  
国際仏教学高等研究所  
年 報

令和三年度  
(第25号)

Annual Report  
of  
The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology  
at Soka University  
for the Academic Year 2021  
Volume XXV

創価大学・国際仏教学高等研究所  
東京・2022・八王子

The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology  
Soka University  
Tokyo・2022

# Some rulers in Vidarbha between the end of the Mauryas and the beginning of the Western Caves: A Farewell to king Kuṭapāda

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## Abstract:

After the Mauryas had to withdraw from the Vidarbha region a series of petty kings took to power. Our knowledge about them has increased considerably since 2007 when a deposit was found at Pusad at a riverside. New names came to the fore, some with legends read as *kuṭapāda*, *kukuṭakhāda*, along with Viga, all related to the already known Sebaka.<sup>1</sup>

This paper argues that *kuṭapāda* is a misreading for *kaṭahādi*, a name which is already known from the facade of cave 10 at Ajanta. In addition it is shown that *kaṭahādi* is the descriptive name of a dynasty of which four rulers can be distinguished, so that the first can be dated close to the end of the Mauryas while the last one, with Buddhist traits, could be the one who was active at Ajanta, together spanning the period from ca. 180 to 140 BC.

## Keywords:

Vidarbha numismatics; Ajanta cave 10; sebaka; kuṭapāda, kaṭahādi, kukuṭakhādi, kukura, viga; Western caves.

What happened after the Mauryas ran out of silver supplies at the beginning of the second century BC? The Mauryan state, based on silver punch-marked coins, came to an end. The succeeding Śuṅga general Puṣyamitra tried to maintain imperial unity, but could not change the bullion calamity: in the mainland of India the silver was gone, and the Śuṅgas turned to issuing coppers and had to reduce the realm. There was no scarcity of copper and so a number of rulers in Central and southern India were in the position to copy the Śuṅgas, adding monetary to political independence.

In order to avoid an interruption of power, the well-documented Sātavāhanas were expected by some to have replaced the Mauryas on the Deccan. This led to the so-called long chronology which bases itself on Puranic genealogies and has the Sātavāhanas begin in 228 BC, right in the time of Aśoka. In defense of this construction, the argument was heard that without this early begin we had to envisage “a political vacuum for about two centuries” (Nagaraju 1981: 23). A number of historians<sup>2</sup> and numismatists have shown that there was no vacuum of currencies in the period concerned. The recent

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<sup>1</sup> The sequence of finds and descriptions is listed in Pieper 2021: 382.

<sup>2</sup> The classical paper on the problem and its solution is by Ajay Mitra Shastri 2001.



catalogues of W. Pieper (2013, 2021) present not the only collections, but the most voluminous ones, which show that there may not have been a central power in the Deccan, but rather a number of smaller and larger local potentates, – everywhere, until the Sātavāhanas managed to centralize power in the first half of the first century BC.

### **Kings in Vidarbha**

The great variety of the coin types found around Central India can be contrasted with a sort of orderly model policy applied by some kings found in the region of Vidarbha, which includes the modern Berar. A collection assembled around Pusad (19°54' N, 77°34' E) was first published by P.P. Kulkarni in 2007 and has since been christened the “Pusad Hoard”. In fact, a great number of these coins came from a river side, where people obviously had been tossing small coins into a well for a long time. Of those coins the earliest were post-Mauryan, clearly following some formal ideas of the Mauryan Punch-marked coins (PMC), while the youngest included early Sātavāhanas and even one run-down silver piece of Julius Caesar. In contrast to Mauryan habits, a number of these early coins were inscribed with the name of the ruler, who occasionally called himself ‘king’, *rājan*. Within the earliest issues was a group which showed a very similar reverse design, but carried the names of different kings on the obverse. The reverse shows well-known symbols in double outline (Pl. 5: 1b, 6b, 7b), which is clear evidence of relationship. Above a circle in double outline a sort of ω can be seen, forming a *nandipada* with the circle. Another king prefers a *śrīvatsa* above the circle, or a hollow cross, while the names were read as *sebaka*, *kuṭapāda*, *viga*, or *kukuṭakhāda*. How these kings interrelate is an open question. They could be rulers in succession or relatives ruling contemporaneously. A few details seem to speak for successive reigns, which then suggests a rule over the same countries. Now that interest is aroused, facts will certainly come to light which will allow more dependable conclusions.

### **Dependable readings**

For the moment the names of the kings concerned need to be verified and interpreted. The king who is called *sebaka* sets a certain standard, as the meaning “servant, votary” (Skt *sevaka*) is descriptive. The name written *viga* is unmistakable and looks personal, possibly Skt *vigra*, meaning “strong”. The two remaining names stand in the focus of this paper. They were first presented and read by Kulkarni in 2007 as *kukuṭapāda* and *kukuṭakhāda* and in this form suggested a close relationship if not identity. *Kukuṭapāda* would have been compared to the hill near Gayā, the *kukuṭapādagiri*, sacred to the Buddhists, verbally the “Hill looking like a cock’s claw.” However, it soon became clear that *kukuṭapāda* cannot be the correct reading of the name ending in *-pāda*, since wherever a *kuku* was expected, there was only one *ka*, and so *kukuṭapāda* shrank to *kuṭapāda* in the readings of Bhandare (2006: 108) and Kulkarni himself (e.g. 2010: 6a).

### **King Kaṭahādi**

However, *kuṭapāda* is not what is written on the coins and despite the latest descriptions in auction catalogues and even Pieper (2021: 385), a number of historians will have seen that there is no sign of the *-u-mātrā*, that there is no *pā*, but a clear *hā*, and that there is well a *da* at the end, but this is topped by a rectangular *-i-mātrā*, often out of flan. So the

reading is *raṃṇo kaṭahādisa*, without an apparent etymology, meaning “Of king Kaṭahādi”. The examples given in Pl. 5: row 1a, 2a+b, will certainly be regarded as convincing: of all the pieces published so far not a single one reads demonstrably differently.

Whatever the name *kaḍahādi* may denote, this royal term is not read for the first time on these coins, since it also occurs on the rock front of the oldest *caitya* hall at Ajanta, cave no. 10. All visitors can read the clear and large letters (fig. 1) as: *vāsiṭhiputasa kaṭahādino gharamukha dānaṃ*, “This facade is the donation of Kaṭahādi, (who is) the son of a woman of the (brahminical) Vāsiṣṭha *gotra*.” This text was published first by Bhau Daji in 1865. Further early authors are listed in Lüders’ List under no. 1197.<sup>3</sup>

This equation of *kaṭahādi* met with on the coins and on the entrance to cave 10 is made here for the first time. It provides a link for both fields involved: The numismatists could date their coins according to the cave, and the cave is certainly linked chronologically to the coins. It remains though for at least one of them to be dated in absolute numbers.<sup>4</sup>

Here there are uncertainties and differing opinions in every respect, only the general frame is certain: somewhere between the end of the Mauryas and the beginning of the Sātavāhanas.

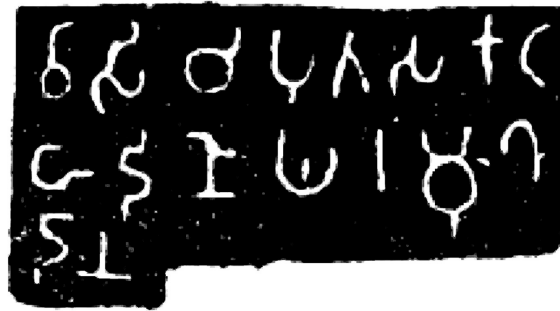


Fig. 1: Donation record of Kaṭahādi at the entrance gate of cave 10, Ajanta (rubbing after Burgess 1883: pl. LV1a).

The uniqueness of the name allows to link the two homonymous persons, it even suggests an identity. Still, there are differences. The Kaṭahādi of the coins presents himself as king (*raṃṇo*) on some issues while the namesake at Ajanta is the donor of a part of a Buddhist edifice, and he is not called “king”, although the shortness of the legend led Burgess (1883: 45) to assume that this shortness hints at a royal background.

The congruence of time is only approximative. The coinage of the king is rightly called “Post-Mauryan” in the auction catalogues, partly based on the occurrence of the symbol of three-circles-on-a-line (Pl. 5: 3c). It occurs in the last group of Mauryan silver

<sup>3</sup> According to Lüders’ List (1909/10) the very first notice was by Bhau Daji, *JBBRAS* 7: 63, of 1865, which I cannot consult. Bhagvanlal Indraji comes next with comments by J. Burgess (1881: 68) with rubbing on plate LVI; then J. Burgess (1883: 116) with readings by G. Bühler.

<sup>4</sup> Nagaraju (1981: 389 = chart I) quotes C14 dates based on the wood from the beams in the vault of the *caitya* hall at Karle. The 2-sigma values admit any date between 200 and 120 BC, what was to be expected. Reports are found in Barker & Mackay (1963: 55, “BM 92”); cf. the C14 date of Bedsa around 60 BC (Barker & Mackay 1968: 3, “BM-155”).

PMCs of the region (Gupta & Hardaker 2014: 178f., nos. 547–567) and still on some bull coppers, and only on these, of Kaṭahādi.

This means that “immediately after” the Mauryas our king filled a local power vacuum, in absolute numbers shortly after 185 BC. The donor of the Ajanta facade was at work in a vaguely similar period, around the middle of the second century BC.

As a third point of comparison we turn to the locality, which is certain for Ajanta, but somewhat doubtful regarding the Kaṭahādi of the coins. Some of his coins are found at Pusad 220 km WSW of Ajanta, but there more than 200 Sebaka pieces found contrast with just three of “Kuṭapāda” and five of “Kukūṭakhāda” (Kulkarni 2010: 6a), suggesting that both rulers were rather not active near this site.

From Bhagwanlal Indraji in 1881 to Cohen in 2002 Kaṭahādi’s inscription at Ajanta was always regarded as the very first epigraph to be preserved at the site. During this post-Mauryan period, in a time that saw some Buddhist sites under threat by the brahminical Śuṅga rulers, only the two *caitya* caves 10 and 9 were built. After the two cave temples were constructed, Ajanta came to a standstill, only to be re-awakened 600 years later. Palaeographically the inscription of the donation record at Ajanta and the coins of Kaṭahādi are on a par. Both divert only marginally from the script as it is known from the Aśokan edicts.<sup>5</sup>

Our donor at Ajanta names his mother's *gotra* as *vāṣiṣṭha*, and for the time being this is the earliest testimony of the custom found among a great number of rulers to name their brahmin mothers in inscriptions, usually leaving the corresponding father totally unmentioned. I collected cases in 2006 (147–52 = 2012: 377–81) and at that time found the earliest case to be Bhāgabhadra, ruler at Vidiśā, who was visited by Dion, ambassador of the Indo-Greek king Antialkidas, who ruled ca. 115–95 BC,<sup>6</sup> that is in Śuṅga, pre-Sātavāhana times. With Kaṭahādi at hand we can shift the custom back a few more decades.

Why would kings suddenly boast of their brahmin mothers? Probably, because they themselves were no brahmins but hoped to profit from that relationship. A brahmin mother does not turn her child from a non-brahmin father into a co-sanguine *sagotra* in the eyes of the family of that mother. When we check the occurrences in the nearly complete list of Western Cave inscriptions collected by Nagaraju (1981: 328–346),<sup>7</sup> we see that very often it is clear that kings with a brahmin mother belong to non-Indian communities, Yavanas, Śakas, or others. Today, the presence of a brahmin wife is still a feature in many Rajastani ruling families, and it remained common in Muslim dynasties.

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<sup>5</sup> Bühler in Burgess 1883: 116: “The letters of this inscription closely resemble the Maurya alphabet, and are not of later age than the first half of the second century B.C.” Burgess’ lines dealing with cave 10 include a memorable observation on the state of the cave when it was found, saying that the “lower portion” of the high entrance arch was closed by a wall of “very large bricks”. Bricks deserving this description were common in Mauryan times. This observation was generally ignored, apart from Cohen (*apud* Spink 2002: 295) who changed the “very large” to “enormous, regular bricks” and dropped the “lower half”, so that now the whole arch appears filled.

<sup>6</sup> This is the frame given in Falk 2006: 148, based on Bopearachchi 1998. An earlier date of 130–120 BC is preferred by R. Senior (2004: 19), but since he upholds a year 1 of Kaniṣka in AD 78, his calculations tend to be too early.

<sup>7</sup> The collection is very useful as such, but should not be taken as reliable with regard to every individual reading.

But why would anyone start to describe his person this way when none of his predecessors did? Could it be that Puṣyamitra, the brahmin assassin and successor to the last Maurya king, Br̥hadratha, tended to accept his southern colleagues more generously when they had links to a brahmin *gotra*?

### King Kukuṭakhādi

Things are much easier with the second of the two kings dealt with here. The reading *kukuṭakhāda* was made by Kulkarni from the outset. As in most cases where the final part of the legend is off flan we have to depend on other evidence, just two more recently published cases (Pl. 5: 6a, 7a), where an *i-mātrā* is visible topping the *da*. The slightly changed reading *kukuṭakhādi* is not found in the catalogues mentioned.

### An attempt at etymologies

The two names of *kaṭahādi* and *kukuṭakhādi* are not imminently recognizable as Sanskritic. But a provisional explanation can be attempted. The similarly sounding final parts of *-hādi* and *-khādi* remind us of a common sound change found in the vernaculars of the time where many terms undergo this type of lenition, the softening of an original *kh* to *h*. Gāndhārī provides numerous examples, like *suha* < *sukha*, *duha* < *duḥkha*, *muha* < *mukha*, or *lihita* < *likhita*. Centuries later we find monograms on some Kushano-Sasanian gold coins separating into *gu-ḍa-ha-ra* or, alternatively, to *gu-ḍa-kha-ra*, identical apart from the *kha* and *ha*.

Taking *-khādi* as the more original form allows to link the term to the root *khād*, “to eat” in the particular usage applied in politics: compounded terms like *bhūmibhuj*, “earth-eating” or *grāmabhuj*, “village-eating” (KathāSS 16.1.24), present first an object, such as a place and end in a verbal form derived from the root *bhuj*, “to eat” and are used to express the right to tax localities, “to enjoy” the income of the locality. The final *-i* could be the result of an *-in*-formation applied to the root, like *bhujaṅga-bhogin*, “snake-eater”, a peacock, nominative in *-ī*, shortened to *-i*-stems in vernaculars.

The remaining first parts in our names *kaṭahādi* and *kukuṭakhādi* are *kaṭa* and *kukuṭa*. The latter of these two could be linked to Skt *kukkuṭa*, “rooster”, or *kukkura*, “dog”, although nowhere on our coins do we see spellings of *kukuṭa* or *kukura* including a geminate. It is easier to understand the first term *kaṭa*, which is frequently found in the area and time as the second member in the name of townships. At Bharhut or Sanchi we find donors from *karahakaṭa*, *bibikanadikaṭa*, *bhojakaṭa*, *parakaṭa*, *benākaṭa*, *dhenukākaṭa*, or *dhānyakaṭa*, the term itself linked by Lüders et al. (1963: 7) to Skt *kaṭaka*, “circle, valley or camp,” which could be based on the *Vaijayantī* (*pātālakāṇḍa*, *purādhyāya* 4) *kaṭako* ‘*strī saṃvāsaḥ skandhāvāraś ca rājadhānī syāt*, “*kaṭaka*, m. or n., can connote a community, a field camp and a royal residence.” Relevant as well is the much later *Trikaṇḍaśeṣa* (*nānārthavarga*, *māntāḥ* 298) *kaṭe puryāñ ca nigamo*, “in case of *kaṭa* and *purī* (the meaning) is ‘trading post’.”

Since *kaṭa* was definitely used for localities of a non-rural character, could then *kukuṭa* denote a locality too? The term reminds us of *kukura*, the name of a certain people and realm, mostly found in combination with other names of peoples, like the *vṛjīs*, *andhakas*, *bhojas*, *yādavas*, all of them found in the very same area where we have Ajanta too, in the wider region of Gujarat, Konkan and Vidarbha. The Mbh and Purāṇas

do not use the variant *kukuṭa* for the country of the *kukura*, but there is an early sealing (Pl. 5) put on internet lists by Girish Sharma, that seems to point in our direction. The seal reads *matagasa kukuṭike galaka[sa]*, where Mataṅga as a personal name is clear; *kukuṭike* could refer to the people or the king of Kukuṭa as does *āvantika* in the *Bṛhatsaṃhitā* when it refers to the people (*janapadāḥ*, 5,64) or the king (*nṛpa*, 86,2) of Avantī. The final term *galaka* should be based on “*gal*, melting (of ores),” so that the complete legend says that this is the seal “of Mataṅga, the melter at (the place of) the king (or the people) of (the land of) Kukuṭa.”

The difference between *kukuṭa* of the coins and *kukura* of the epic and the Purāṇas could be due to changes in time and place. The coins of Kukuṭakhādi and the seal reading *kukuṭika* belong to BC times, while the state called *kukura* – apart from its mention in the Mbh and the Purāṇas – is found in the list of countries ruled by Rudradāman (LL 965) in the second century AD: Surāṣṭra, Śvabhra, Maru, Kaccha, Sindhu-Sauvīra, Kukura, Aparāṃta, Niṣāda etc., the king having reconquered a great number of them from the Sātavāhanas. A few decades earlier the Sātavāhana king Vāsiṣṭhīputra Śrī-Pulumāvi (LL 1123) claimed by the end of the first century AD to have ruled the following peoples, among many others: Surāṭha (Surāṣṭra), Kukura, Aparāṃta (Aparānta), Anupa (Anūpa), and Vidabha (Vidarbha). If the land of Kukuṭa was ever up on the Deccan in Berar, then the land of the Kukura needs to be located rather in northern Gujarat (Mitra Shastri 1996: 80). The *Bṛhatsaṃhitā* 14,4 sees the Kukuras in Madhyadeśa, somewhere in the middle of both.

The two terms *kaṭahādi* and *kukuṭakhādi* would then denote someone who “enjoys the townships”, while a *kukuṭakhādi* king would “enjoy the Kukuṭa/Kukura country.” This explanation is grammatically sound,<sup>8</sup> but it produces an implication: like *sebaka*, Skt *sevaka*, the terms would be descriptive, and may not have been personal. A few decades later, the Sātavāhanas clearly gather behind a descriptive cover term, one meaning either “transporters of horses (*sāta*)” or “transporters of goods (*sārtha*)”, spellings in favor of either meaning are frequent, and the semantic change based on phonetic closeness. If we take the terms *kaṭahādi* and *kukuṭakhādi* as descriptive for two related political units then they as well may have been used by more than one person, either as dynastic terms or as guild trademarks. In fact, this view could explain why there are regular overstrikes found on these coins, which otherwise could only be explained by a king who keeps on overstriking his own coinage.

### Overstrikes indicative of four kings in succession

In the *kaṭakhādi* group the oldest issues show a nicely cut *gajalakṣmī* motif, with two elephants pouring water from globular pitchers over a lady placed on a lotus. A number of these issues have received heavy punches showing a bull standing to right, the punch measuring about a quarter the size of the underlying coin. Then there are others where the bull is already part of the original composition, with the term *kaṭahādisa* placed above the animal, but upside down (Pl. 5: row 2, line 2). Some of the bull types have received a small countermark showing an elephant (Pl. 5: row 3, line 3). There are others

<sup>8</sup> In a number of auction catalogues *-khādi* is derived from the deity named *skanda*, often found as *khada* or *khaṇḍa* in Prakrit epigraphs, but the long *ā* and the final *-i* contradict such a surmise.



with square or round flan showing an elephant to right with the legend above but not inverted (Pl. 5: row 4, line 3), having received a countermark from a punch showing a tree-in-railing, and bearing the unmistakable form of a *stūpa* (Pl. 5: row 5, line 4).

This sequence is rather consistent and shows that we have to deal with at least four kings called *kaṭahādi*:

- no. 1 issues the *gajalakṣmī* type;
- no. 2 issues the bull type and has *gajalakṣmī* overstruck on the obverse with his bull;
- no. 3 issues the elephant type, often on round flans, and has bull types overstruck with a small elephant, applied only to the reverse;
- no. 4 overstrikes the round elephant type with his tree-in-railing inside a *stūpa*-outlined punch on the obverse. An independent type of this tree-in-railing within a *stūpa* silhouette is so far missing.

With this sequence in view it is easier to understand how a *kaṭahādi* could contribute to the construction of the cave at Ajanta and how a *kaṭahādi* can issue coins shortly after the downfall of the Mauryas: It was no. 1 who started the series and it was (at the least) no. 4 with his *stūpa*-shaped punch who was busy with the *stūpa*-sheltering *caitya*-hall at Ajanta. At least four rulers of one family make it easy to span the period from the end of the Mauryas to the beginning of the caves at Ajanta.

Four kings with the same “name” show that *kaṭahādi* in fact has to be taken as a descriptive term, most likely meaning “town(s)-enjoying”, used by a short-lived dynasty. The term might hint at at least one town, but it could also cover more than one. Close to Ajanta we have the ancient sites of Bhogavardhana (the present Bhokartan), the modern Aurangabad or the singular rock formation at Dhaulagiri, that is the old city of the Yādavas called Devagiri.

A look at the group of the *kukūṭakhādi* coins shows a number of differences: there we see only two main animals, bull and elephant, and there are no overstrikes or countermarks. Instead, we find the term *raño*, “of king *kukūṭakhādi*” right from the start and seemingly everywhere, while on the *kaṭahādi* side only no. 2 with his elephant sports this title. All others, and certainly the no. 4 namesake active at Ajanta, do without.

For Ajanta we can summarize: Among the families that ruled Vidarbha after the downfall of the Mauryas there were at least three that provided a series of kings who are not made known by their personal names, but by descriptive dynastic names. The *sebakas* (“servants, votaries”), the *kukūṭakhādīs* (“enjoying the Kukūṭa land”) and the *kaṭahādīs* (“enjoying the town(s)”) share a number of graphical devices that ornament the reverse sides of their coinage, the most conspicuous being circles and *nandipadas* in double outline. All clans show elephants and bulls on their reverse sides, while the *kaṭahādīs* start with *gajalakṣmī* in an early generation and end with a counter-mark that shows a tree-in-railing within a *stūpa*-shaped outline. The animal types of the *kaṭahādīs* come in a sequence which represents at least four rulers of which the last on account of the *stūpa* shape of his counter-mark is the most likely to be the *vāsiṣṭhīputra kaṭahādi* who told us that he financed the entrance construction (*gharamukha*) at cave no. 10 at Ajanta. In a dynastic succession whose coinage started around 180 BC, the fourth king, whose donation record was still inscribed in a script with Mauryan traits, would have lived around 140 BC.

For the numismatic side the summary is shorter: a king Kuṭapāda never existed,

while a Kaṭahādi did exist, even more than once.

## Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Osmund Bopearachchi, Wilfried Pieper and Elisabeth Steinbrückner for commenting on an earlier version, all pointing out that the proposed sequence of the Kaṭahādi issues might profit from further fine-tuning. James Benson ensured comprehensible English. To all I am deeply beholden.

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1a/b: Kaṭahādi with Gajalakṣmī on reverse (after Kulkarni 2007 no. 4);  
1-2d: Donation record of Kaṭahādi at the entrance gate of cave 10, Ajanta;  
2a: Kaṭahādi, Bull punch on Gajalakṣmī (Classical Numismatic Gallery [CNGal] 21, 106);  
2b/c: Kaṭahādi, bull type with legend upside-down (CNGal 39, 68);  
3b/c: Kaṭahādi, Bull type with elephant punch on reverse (CNGal 36, 47);

4-c/d: Kaṭahādi, Elephant type with legend upright (CNGal 21, 127);  
4-5a/b: Seal reading *kukūṭike* ([http://www.flickr.com/photos/girish\\_sharma/4200529274/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/girish_sharma/4200529274/));  
5-c/d: Kaṭahādi, Elephant type with stūpa-shaped punch (Oswal 62, 15);  
6a/b: Kukūṭakhādi, Bull type (Bombay 6, 7);  
7a/b: Kukūṭakhādi, Bull type (CNGal 21, 79).